

To

ALUMNAE
SHARE STORIES
OF RACISM,
SISTERHOOD,
STRENGTH AND
PRIDE

Be

Black

Woman

WHY WE'RE TELLING OUR STORIES

BEFORE MY CLASS WAS ADMITTED IN 1970, African American women made up less than 1 percent of Smith College's total student population. At that time,

after years of racial turmoil across the country, America was finally beginning to open its eyes to the value of true integration and access to education. Black students attending Smith during the late '60s had collaborated with the college administration and admission office to implement ways to amplify black voices on Smith's campus and to significantly increase the numbers of black faculty members as well as the black student population. Thanks to the determination of the sisters who preceded us on campus,

69 black women enrolled in the class of 1974; we represented more than 10 percent of the first-year class, making ours the largest class of black women in Smith's history. What that meant for me—an 18-year-old from North Haven, Connecticut, with only three black people in my high school class—was that I would finally have a significant number of people who looked like me to enable me to experience that “sameness” and Black identity I so desperately sought in high school, while also finding and claiming my place as a black woman within the larger Smith community.

Many black women from the class of 1974 went on to significant achievements and rewarding careers. We graduated from Smith fully confident that we were ready and capable of becoming leaders in various capacities and fields. For many years, I served in managerial leadership and executive roles at AT&T and the Ford Foundation, and since my graduation I have remained closely connected to Smith, which contributed (alongside my experiences as a black woman, a daughter and mother and wife) to who I am today.

Over the decades—as I've been involved in various capacities with the alumnae association and the board of trustees—I've thought about what Smith is like for each new generation of students. I've remained concerned about how young black women are managing on campus and wonder what their lives are like outside the Grécourt Gates. Given their academic and social experiences at Smith, have they found the post-college world as welcoming as perhaps their white colleagues have? Were their post-college experiences, relative to “difference,” similar to mine?

These questions came rushing back last summer amid reports that a black student who was on a lunch break from her campus job had been questioned by campus police. She was questioned about resting on a couch in a house common area. One could not help wondering if a white student would have been asked the same question. The incident sparked a much-needed conversation about implicit and explicit bias, privilege and the unique experiences of black women. It also made me wonder about the world that Smith-educated black women are entering. Are they experiencing what Malcolm X once said: that “the most disrespected person in America is the black woman”?

The editors of the *Quarterly* were asking the same questions. They reached out to me and to another black alumna, essayist and novelist Martha Southgate '82, to help them envision a package of stories that would attempt to highlight the successes and the challenges, the joy of sisterhood and the pain of prejudice experienced by different generations of black Smith women.

We brainstormed a list of alumnae to participate. Some wrote their own essays; others were interviewed by African American journalist April Simpson '06, who captured their words and ideas in “as told to” essays. Their lives are varied and so are the thoughts they chose to share. We hope you find their words illuminating.

Linda Smith Charles '74
Martha Southgate '82



'I'VE PICKED A LANE. IT'S RACIAL JUSTICE.'

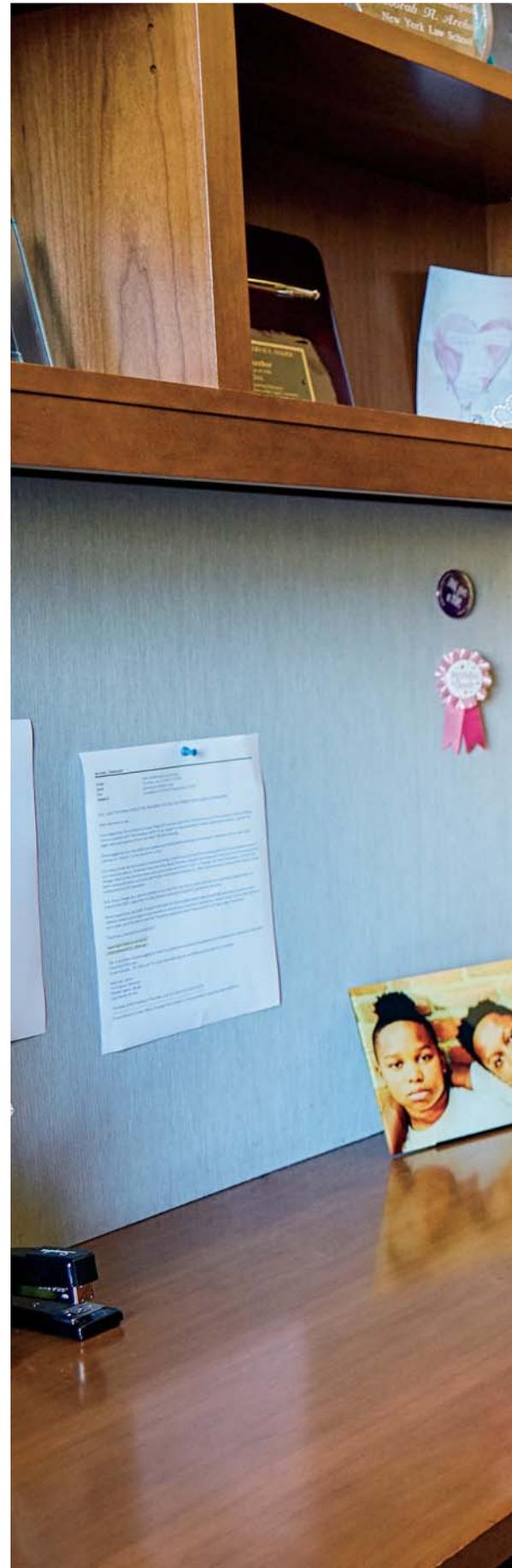
As a litigator and law professor, Deborah Archer '93 uses her lived experiences to sharpen her focus on issues of equity, civil rights and the unique challenges facing black women

By Martha Southgate '82
Photographs by Beth Perkins

FROM THE MINUTE SHE graduated from Yale Law School in 1996, Deborah Archer '93 put her focus on one thing: fighting for racial justice via the law.

Her passion comes not only from the rightness of justice as a moral issue but from personal experiences that helped light that fire in her heart.

She worked at the ACLU on state and federal racial justice litigation; later, as assistant counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, she litigated cases involving voting rights, employment discrimination and educational equity.



Deborah Archer '93
in her office
at NYU law
school. She
brings a
background
in civil rights
litigation
to the
classroom.



Her passion is not confined to her own work as an attorney. In the 15 years she taught at New York Law School, Archer guided students in crucial civil justice work, including enlisting their aid in drafting an amicus brief for the 2014 appeal in *Fisher v. University of Texas*, a case in which the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately upheld admissions policies that sought to promote diversity at the school. In July 2018, she joined New York University School of Law as an associate professor. She teaches the Civil Rights Clinic, in which students work on a wide range of civil rights and social justice matters through direct client representation, appellate advocacy and the development of advocacy campaigns.

Archer lives in Brooklyn with her husband, Richard Buery, who works at the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Foundation. Previously, as New York's deputy mayor, Buery was instrumental in creating the city's universal pre-kindergarten program. The couple has two sons, ages 15 and 12.

And if Archer weren't a lawyer? Well, even in her fantasy alternate career, racial equity plays a large part. "I would probably be a photographer," she says. "I often think about the love, hate, strength and beauty captured by those photographers who documented the civil rights movement through their photographs. And the impact those photographs had in advancing the calls for justice."

What was your experience as a black woman at Smith?

Overall, I really loved my time at Smith. My parents are Jamaican immigrants, so I'm a first-generation American citizen and the first in my family to graduate from college and law school. I wouldn't say that we were poor, but we struggled financially. So when I got to Smith, I was exposed to people and ways of living that I didn't know existed. In that sense, Smith was wonderful and was really central in making me who I am today. But it also was central in shaping who I am in a way that was not so positive. In my first year in Tyler House, I received a racist note under my door. It called me the N-word and said I should go home.

Wow. That's terrible! That's so hard.

It was incredibly difficult. I had seen racial discrimination all of my life as a black immigrant growing up in Hartford, Connecticut. Very early on when we were living there, someone spray-painted "KKK" on the side of the house and on our car. So it wasn't surprising to me that someone at Smith would do that. What was surprising was that I had felt so safe in that house. I had felt so welcomed. When that happened, it really shattered trust and my feeling of safety and belonging—not only in that house, but in the college.

Did you recover that feeling of safety before you graduated, or did it remain a mixed bag the rest of your time there?

I grew to feel more comfortable, but never fully comfortable and never fully trusting. You find your community, and I focused on that community there for supporting me. That's what helped me leave with an overall positive feeling about Smith College and how the school helped position me to be successful in life.

What allowed you to carry both the anger and pain of the experience as well as the feeling that you could grow from it and not let it stop you?

I think the positive comes from the institutional response and the response of other individuals who were there. Smith took this very seriously and made me feel that they were going to do what they could do to address this and try to make me feel safe again. They brought in handwriting experts and took other measures to investigate this incident (though they were unable to find and prove who had done it). More than that, they made efforts to try to rebuild the community institutionally. The individuals who I interacted with—my friends and my head resident—really worked at making sure that I felt safe again.

What would you say to a student who faced an incident like this?

You have to figure out how you can empower yourself in difficult situations, and to make sure that people don't get what they want. If I had crumbled and disengaged or if I had gone, that would have allowed them to succeed. My mantra in life is that I'm never going to allow someone else—their views, their biases—to deny me an opportunity. I find the support that I need, the network that I need, so that I'm going to get the same benefits that [those who are biased against me] are getting out of this experience.

I was lucky enough to see Michelle Obama during her recent book tour and as she spoke it was clear to me that she has had to mask some mannerisms, some ways of being that mark her as black. She grew up working class on the South Side of Chicago, so there's slang she uses, for instance, that is particular to that upbringing. She spoke quite thoughtfully about how and why she downplayed that part of herself. I wonder if, in your career, you've had to mask in that way.

I absolutely feel like I've had to. Some of it is by choice, but some of it is by necessity; I think that's part of the spectrum of oppression and discrimination. For example, I worked at a fairly conservative law firm. When I stopped perming my hair and had a natural—that was a big thing for me to do at a law



firm. So even on a symbolic level, there's a kind of masking. Part of moving from diversity to inclusion is not only having me here, but having me here in a way that allows me to embrace who I am. And for my lived experiences to influence the culture of this institution that I've joined. That said, more and more I've been able to become my true self when I'm at work. Some of that comes with institutional progress around equity and inclusion. Some of that has come from me, with age. I just feel like I am who I am and I'm not going to try to hide that anymore.

Do you feel that the challenges facing black women differ substantially from the challenges facing white women?

We need to take a step back and have that conversation about black women, because there are clearly different challenges that face black women and they get lost in the shuffle when we talk about challenges facing women and even sometimes when we talk about challenges facing black people, no matter what their gender. Just about every challenge that society faces, black women face it on a deeper level.

I want to think through what those unique challenges are and find a way to address them. The broader conversation about gender equity and racial justice doesn't necessarily get to the unique issues that are facing black women.

Absolutely. I also think that the challenges facing black women aren't always across racial lines; for example, there are situations where there's inequity between a black man and a black woman.

It's very layered, and you can keep adding layers. Transgender women of color face unique issues. We look at, for example, the violence against women. Transgender women of color often face more violence than any other community. The intersectionality of life is still not fully explored and it's particularly not explored when it comes to women of color.

Intersectionality is such a key word in talking with students. And so many young people feel very bleak about race relations in today's polarized, angry climate. How do you talk to your students about the mood of the country?

It's really tough. Some of the blatant racism that has come out from under cover was prompted by the election of a black president. That led to what we're seeing today, and I think people are confused. To hold both of those things in our heads—that we can be making incredible progress toward equity on the one hand, but still have deep and profound challenges around racial equality on the other hand—is really hard. Too often people can't see that there are both.

My students and other young folks I interact with do feel overwhelmed by injustice. They feel overwhelmed by the racism. I try to convey to them that it's all about a cycle. When you look at where black people were in 1818, and when you look at where we were in 1918 and now you look at where we are in 2018, it does show you that progress is possible. And that people before us did not despair. Martin Luther King didn't despair. Harriet Tubman didn't despair. John Lewis, when he was fighting for voting rights, didn't despair. Then who are we to despair when we are living and enjoying the fruits of their labor? I also tell my students that everyone can choose a lane. The lane I've chosen is primarily about racial justice. That doesn't mean that I don't care deeply about other issues, but I know that other people are on it, and that I need to stay on this one. In this current challenging time, I think it's just important for us all to pick a lane that we can fight in, and together we can move the needle.

Martha Southgate '82 is the author of four novels, most recently The Taste of Salt. She is working toward an MFA in playwrighting at Brooklyn College.

'I FELT LIKE I WAS BEING TOKENIZED'

Is it inclusive if the only queer person of color at an event is the performer?

By Billy Dean Thomas

So I had a performance at an event put on by one of the largest music-streaming companies. I was really excited. They emailed me, and they were like, "Hey, this is going to be a showcase to honor queer artists. It's an internal party, and this is what we have lined up." I get there and nobody in the audience is of color aside from the people that I came with.

The whole time there were speakers talking about the power of inclusion and equity and how we need to have safe spaces where everybody feels like they can participate and they can have conversations. But I'm looking around this room and what they're saying is not being exemplified.

I felt uncomfortable. I also felt like I was being tokenized because they wanted to have this diverse, queer event. It felt like I was chosen as a tool as opposed to actually indoctrinating inclusive practices into the structures. It can be really hurtful to experience that. And it happens. A lot. And then to also be treated poorly within that: not paid on time, not paid



In Boston, rapper Billy Dean Thomas premieres "American Gothic," complete with a string quartet and video projections.

enough and not treated like what I did was of value afterward.

On top of that is the fact that you're supposed to honor me because I'm marginalized, but then you continue to structurally oppress at the same time. Add on the additional layers of my identity that intersect, and the access to opportunities starts to deteriorate. So I write songs about those experiences and then I perform them in rooms with the most nondiverse crowds of people ever. Sometimes I'm really nervous because I'm in a room full of 80 straight, or straight-passing, white people, and this next song is about reparations.

I am often the only person of color in the room. It's scary. But more reason to do it, and then you get really interesting responses like, "Thank you so much for sharing that." Or, "It's really important." But you also get the really uncomfortable faces while I'm midsentence saying, "Pay me reparations." People want to vomit on themselves. But they have to sit with that.—
AS TOLD TO APRIL SIMPSON '06

Billy Dean Thomas (Olivia McClendon '14) is a hip-hop recording artist and composer in Boston.

'I AM NOT BLACK OR A WOMAN. I'M A BLACK WOMAN.'

By Caroline Clarke '85

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hat defines you more—your gender or your race?”

The question came floating toward me like a slow-pitch softball, tossed by a white friend, surrounded by other

white friends of mine as we lounged in Albright House, where, as a first-year, I had been the only black resident, struggling to find my fit at my unfamiliar, mostly white all-women's college. Now a senior, I finally felt at home. Their question, though, threw me.

It came during a vaguely philosophical conversation, the kind usually launched over late-night pizza when everyone's avoiding their studies and sleep. I had long since fielded inquiries about why I ironed my clothes, lotioned my skin, oiled my hair and had mostly black art on my walls, but those were small, meaningless curiosities by comparison.

This one cut to the heart of who I was, whose I was and how I saw myself. I had never been asked such a thing. Never even considered it. Unnerved, I understood that it came from the same well-intentioned and stunningly insensitive place as the always jarring, “I don't really see you as black.” It was rooted in *their* struggle to define and embrace me, which had nothing to do with my own.

Whether the question was really about allegiances, defining physical characteristics or the forces that most shaped my experiences, perceptions and politics, wasn't the answer obvious?

The fact that they weren't asking this of each other said it all. “At Smith,” I said, “my race defines me more.” Surely there was more to say, an awkward but important conversation to be had. But not then. I was grateful that we moved on.

I have come to understand in the years since that my truest answer is this: I can't choose. I am not black or a woman. I'm a black woman. One whole

being, not the sum of separable parts. My experience in the world is unique to black women—distinct from any man or any woman of any other race, particularly the white race, whose advantages are still too often reinforced and leveraged at the expense of my community, my children, myself. My race is systematically oppressed in this country, as is

my gender, so the intersectionality of my experience as a black woman is darkly clear. A strange mix of acceptance and resistance—both survival tools—shapes me in every way.

That night in Albright has come back to me repeatedly in recent years as I've watched white women align themselves with those who consistently derail my interests,

their interests as women and the interests of their own white sisters. At the black-owned company where I work, I lead a brand created to celebrate, connect and encourage women of color to seek and leverage power—not only for themselves, but for each other and for all.

White women have not proven to be our natural allies, which again raises that question once posed to me. I wish I'd thought (or had the courage) to return it back at Smith. It would have opened a dialogue that is desperately needed if we're to collectively grow, prosper and leverage power as women, together.

Smith should be leading such conversations, especially now, when the question hovers around us, weighty and unspoken, its answer more critical than ever. What do white women stand for? Who do they most want to stand with them? What defines them more, their gender or their race?

Writer and journalist Caroline Clarke '85 is the chief brand officer for Women of Power at Black Enterprise magazine.



Why was I the one to be asked if I'm defined more by my race or by my gender?



**'WHO
CAME TO
SOOTHE
MY SOUL?
ALL MY
BLACK
SISTERS.'**

At Smith, their smarts urged me on and helped me find my identity and my power.

**By Charlise Lyles '81
Photograph by Brandon Thibodeaux**

STRAWBERRY BLOND, blue-eyed, red-lip-sticked, smiling, the sun in her eyes, a white woman led me to Smith College.

Yes—“*Out-of-the-ash-I-rise-with-my-red-hair-And-I-eat-men-like-air*”—Sylvia Plath '55.

In 10th-grade English class, I'd read her woe-fully electric memoir, *The Bell Jar*. Unabashedly bitter, she bitched: Oh, to be female in a male-suffocated world.

I was stricken. As improbable as it may seem, I, a girl growing up

Afro and American in a housing project on the east side of Cleveland, connected to that voice. “*Every woman is a whore*,” she wrote. And that's how me and my sister felt being sexually assaulted every week in the pissy hallway while trying to get to our apartment. Forced whoredom.

Sivvy Plath and I were worlds apart in class and culture. Yet the common core of our experience was the same: male abuse. And our weapon was the same: a pen powered by passion, poetry, incisive writing that penetrated like a pair of surgical scissors.

I went to bed dreaming of Smith College, gracious living and literature. I would become a piercing writer like Sivvy, a mistress of metaphor: “An elephant, a ponderous house.”

Instead, upon entering the Gré-court Gates, I encountered white girls whose privileged chirping and alienating blue-eyed stares annoyed me to my core. *What do you call those? Corn rows?* The onus always on me to explain my culture, my being. *Would Sivvy have looked at me that way?* I was disappointed, but

unfazed. As a scholarship student at a prep school, I'd heard it all before.

But when my *Beowulf* professor—a newish fellow—insisted I needed a remedial writing course, I was fazed. Downright insulted. An obedient student, I did as told. After I penned only two essays, the professor, a woman this time, informed me I had no business in her class. My writing far exceeded that of most students, she assured me. My grade was A.

My 20th-century-novel class posed challenges as well. George Orwell's *Coming Up for Air* and Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*—who can ever forget the temptress Clavdia Chauchat?—intrigued. Still, it pained that my insightful professor seemed oblivious to the genius of African American novelist Toni Morrison. I mustered my courage and confronted him: "Don't you know *The Song of Solomon*—'O, Sugarman done fly away'—is arguably one of the greatest novels of all time?" Seven years after I graduated, Morrison won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*, and, ultimately, the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature. I was vindicated.

Who came to rescue and soothe my soul after these unnerving clashes?

All my black sisters with their sassy, sizzling intellect, creativity and daring. Robina Gumbs '82, prelaw, poised, sharp as a tack. Charlene Cassimire '81, theatre, dance and acting. Ellen Chesley '81, government and economics, a skilled no-nonsense debater at Thursday-evening dining. Beverly Dancy '81, psychology, providing witty civic analysis of Brooklyn, New York. Dana Wise '80, prelaw and Buddhist, chanting her strange mantra every morning like Queequeg. Phyllis Winfield '81, religion, immersed in a yearlong marathon to read the entire unabridged *Merriam-Webster* dictionary.

Just as a white woman beckoned me to Smith, another gave me my final send-off as a writer. I remember that night like it was yesterday: dinner at the President's House, the light-blue Queen Anne sofa, her sparkling Outback-blue eyes. "And what will your voice be?" Jill Ker Conway asked. I'd always liked her grit, the sand in her soul, *The Road from Coorain*. Inside I shuddered, no idea how to answer.

Voice.

It's taken a lifetime to realize that Sivvy, Robina, Charlene, Ellen, Beverly, Dana, Phyllis, Jill and so many others—black, white, Asian, Middle Eastern—gave me voice. Their in-your-face smarts and academic audacity inspired and urged me on to the three literary prizes I won senior year and beyond. Each, in her own way, gave me identity, perspective, power and words to speak and be heard as a Smith woman of color in the world.

Writer and editor Charlise Lyles '81 wrote the memoir "Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?": From the Projects to Prep School.

'I YEARNED FOR A COMFORT AND CONFIDENCE IN MY BLACKNESS.'

Growing up immersed in white culture meant I had to go on a journey of discovery about my heritage.

By Lori Tharps '94

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hen I entered Smith College in 1990, I made a secret promise to myself: I wasn't going to befriend any white people. You see, I had spent the first 18 years of my life

living in all-white neighborhoods, socializing in all-white friend groups and graduating from a high school where I was the only black female in my senior class. Not only had I been surrounded by white people, I had been surrounded by white culture and knew very little about my own African American heritage.

College, I decided, was going to be a time to immerse myself in Blackness. But Smith didn't exactly offer a lot of opportunities for an authentic Black experience. First of all, my roommate was white. And she was lovely. I couldn't help myself. Jenny and I became fast friends.



Journalist Lori Tharps '94 uncovers stories that celebrate the Black experience. Her new podcast is called *My American Meltingpot*.

Also, while I had assumed that I would naturally become friends with all of the other black girls on campus, I ended up with mostly Asian American friends. Needless to say, by the time I left Smith, I still felt like a stranger in my own skin. And in many ways, this shamed me. I yearned for a comfort and confidence in my Blackness, but it still eluded me and I figured I'd have to remain on the margins of my own community.

Fast-forward a few years. At Columbia University, where I was studying for a master's degree in journalism, I decided to write about the culture and politics of hair in the black community. Little did I know how influential that decision would be on the rest of my life.

Even though my adviser contended that the topic of Black hair wasn't worthy of an academic thesis, the project became my entrée into the Black com-

munity; it was the basis for my first book, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (St. Martin's), and it set the course for the rest of my career as a journalist, writer and public intellectual.

To write about Black hair, I had to go on a journey of discovery about the Black experience, beginning in 15th-century Africa and ending in the 21st century. I learned all of the history I should have learned in high school and college. More importantly, I gained a deep appreciation for and pride in my culture and heritage. Along the way, I also realized, with mounting anger, that so much of the history of black people in this country has been hidden or erased, and only through independent study can it be found.

I decided that my mission as a journalist would be to tell the diverse stories of the Black experience. My goal was to expand the limited narrative passed off as "Black history"—the one that begins with slavery and ends with Martin Luther King Jr.—so that no future black child would grow up like me, unaware of their own greatness. Moreover, I wanted all people, not just black people, to understand, acknowledge and appreciate how much black citizens have shaped this country.

Now, I always look for unique ways to tell black stories. I've written about black people in Spain. I've written about a black chef from Sweden. And I've written about black people who adopt white children. I love what I do, and I feel so fortunate that I've been able to write about a subject that I feel so passionately about.

The thing is, if you had told 18-year-old me that my life as a writer would be based on celebrating Blackness, I never would have believed it. I might even have rejected the notion. And there were times along the way when I thought my career would be stunted by centering Blackness instead of a more mainstream approach, but I looked to Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston as my guides. They unapologetically wrote for and about black people and never thought to apologize. So I decided I won't either.

Lori Tharps '94 teaches journalism at Temple University. Her latest book is Same Family, Different Colors: Confronting Colorism in America's Diverse Families.



Attorney and executive Sandra Williams '75 says learning to stay cool in the face of prejudice was good training for a legal career.



**'IF WE LISTEN
TO HOW
OTHERS
DEFINE US,
WE REMAIN
STUCK'**

Sandra Williams '75 is a senior vice president at CBS Television in Los Angeles, where she serves as deputy general counsel. In a conversation with journalist April Simpson '06, she talks about the inner strength she developed as she navigated law school and her legal career.

Photographs by Amanda Friedman



As a black woman, how did you learn to navigate predominantly male and white law school environments in the 1970s?

It helped that there were other black women there. It was a difficult environment for all of us, and so to the extent that we could get together and share our frustrations, and how freaked out we were about being there, was really helpful.

Law school was hard. There were times when I did not think I was going to make it. At times, I wasn't sure I wanted to. Then, at one point—I can't attribute it to anything in particular—I just decided, you know what, I'm going to do this.

A lot of women in my era, and some of those that came before, were used to being pioneers. We were used to being the first wave of black students in our high schools, in college. So, I developed over those years this sense of responsibility that I don't do this just for me. I do this for my family. I do this for my community. I do this for my race.

Were there any incidents in law school where someone, such as a teacher or a peer, expected less of you or discriminated against you because you're a black woman?

I remember feeling uncomfortable in classes when we were discussing the

Bakke case, which was an affirmative action case that was pending before the Supreme Court at the time. It was very hard for me to have a dispassionate intellectual discussion about affirmative action, first of all, because I felt very strongly about it, and secondly, because implicit in the comments of students that were criticizing affirmative action was that I and other black students perhaps didn't deserve to be there.

That was tough. It was also good training as a lawyer to be in a situation where you're tempted to respond emotionally, but remembering that you have to come up with cogent legal arguments. You've got to be able to keep your emotions in check to be able to argue and defend your position.

There are many recent instances of black women and girls being disrespected, such as the way the president and members of his administration have criticized Rep. Maxine Waters' appearance and that of black women journalists. Do you worry about younger generations of black women and girls coming up in this environment?

It's incredibly depressing at times because these are battles that we fought and I thought we'd won already. It requires that those of us who are a little bit older remind the young folks of something that my grandparents and my parents used to say: It's not what they call you, it's what you answer to. That's always been a guiding force for me; it's more important that I know who I am and I won't be limited by how others define me.

As black people, we have always had to rely on our inner strength. We've always had to look to those older folks to tell us that we could be great, that we could achieve what we wanted in life and that we couldn't let anybody turn us around. So, I think that is called for even more now. We certainly can't allow our president to define us, nor can we allow anybody else who would tell us that we are less than fully capable of demonstrating excellence, brilliance and beauty. Anything less than that is just not the truth of who we are.



'I'M PROUD THAT OUR STUDENTS HOLD US ACCOUNTABLE'

Unity. Community. These have made a silver lining as the campus has responded to acts of intolerance.

By Deanna Dixon '88

I recently found an old T-shirt that reads: "709 - 686 = 23 PROUD BLACK WOMEN OF THE SMITH COLLEGE CLASS OF 1988." I don't remember the T-shirt. I do remember being one of the 23. I remember when the N-word was painted on the steps of Lilly Hall, where the Mwangi Cultural Center was then located and where the BSA [Black Students' Alliance] held meetings and parties. I remember how hurtful that act was for many of us and the subsequent discussions in Lawrence House about race.

Such incidents were not unique to Smith, just as today's microaggressions are not unique to Smith now. The silver lining that results, however, is unity. Community. Our community comes together to support those who are hurt by racism and intolerance. I am proud that it's our students who insist on action, who call for justice, who hold us accountable.

I've worked in the admission office at Smith full time since 2009 but started at Smith a few years prior as a part-time admission counselor. Last year, I became the dean of admission. When prospective students ask me to name my favorite part about Smith, I have a ready and deeply felt answer: "Community." Usually I only have enough time to describe community as a

mere feeling of welcome, but I wish I could more fully express the enormity of what the word means to me.

As a student, my community was limited to my house. Typical of many Smithies, I developed fast friendships that have lasted a lifetime. I was fortunate to have a diverse set of friends—racially, geographically, socioeconomically and by sexual orientation. My friend group had it all.

Although I chose Smith because I felt welcomed before I even applied, I didn't realize community was so important until I needed it. Today, students arrive at Smith already equipped to understand its importance. When prospective students ask about it, I tell them there are many ways to find community here. Sometimes you have to search for it beyond the doors of your house, but often a sense of community greets you at the Grécourt Gates and stays with you a lifetime.

Deanna Dixon '88 is dean of admission at Smith College.



Deanna Dixon '88 found a tight community at Smith that sustained her. As dean of admission, she can pass that wisdom to today's students.

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y first book of poetry was published last fall, two months before I turned 65. I've been writing poetry for over 30 years, and my poems have been published in literary magazines and performed with dancers. I'm happy that my poems have found a wider audience.

I also write fiction, nonfiction, hybrid forms and a blog. I have a lot to say. When I write, I am free to spread out and explore what I want to say and what container I want to place my thoughts in. Often, I am propelled by a need to address something that rises up out of my experience.

Not too long ago, there was a flurry of robberies in my neighborhood and our mayor and a city council member held a town hall meeting to address residents' concerns. I encountered a neighbor who took it upon herself to question me when it was my turn to sign an email list the councilman was circulating. There were several of us standing around the table, waiting to sign the sheet, yet my neighbor chose to question only me,

the only black person in line at the time. Later, on my blog, I tried to parse out the complexity of the interaction, work through my emotional reactions (frustration, indignance, annoyance) and make some sense of what I had experienced. This is some of what I wrote: "I turned the interaction around quickly. I answered Sharon [not her real name] in the affirmative, made sure to emphasize the longevity of my tenure in the neighborhood, and I then introduced myself by first name and asked for her name. Next, I handed the 'Do you live in the neighborhood?' question back to Sharon and stepped into the role of gatekeeper. Change in power differential through a double ward-off to Sharon, whose excuse, once she awakened somewhat from her trance of privilege and entitlement, was that some of the people at the meeting were business owners and not residents. I didn't quite get the significance of that distinction, as I guessed that business owners probably were as interested in not becoming victims of armed robberies to the same degree that residents were not interested in becoming victims.

A few years before, I wrote a poem titled "What Do You See" about noticing a consistent reaction from women, mostly white, as I walked the streets of my neighborhood and the larger community. I've been walking these same streets for more than three decades. I am tall, with a statuesque build, and I walk at a good pace. It's clear that these women are not really seeing me.

*It's hard for me to smile/ as I watch them cringe.
Their pupils dilate, bodies stiffen,
purses press tightly into breasts.
My breasts want to walk
from block to block,
iris to eucalyptus,
welcome to rest my thoughts
in a garden,
on a corner.
I'm not interested in sirens,
gleaming black metal,
911.*

Writing my truth—what I see, feel, think and imagine—is the way I challenge the status quo and beliefs that convince some that I embody any of the stereotypes often placed on black women and many other people.

Through writing I am able to bolster and nurture myself and to sustain the knowledge I have of myself as whole. And it's much stronger medicine than silence.

Joyce Young '75 is a Brooklyn native now living in Northern California. She's currently at work on a novel, Parallel Journey, and a series of essays about a decade of caring for her mother.

'CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO BY WRITING MY TRUTH'

When stereotypes challenge my sense of identity, my poetry brings me back to wholeness.

**By Joyce Young '75
Photograph by Jen Siska**



'WHAT EXCITES YOU, GIVES YOU JOY, GIVES YOU HOPE



I FIND JOY in the ways that black women are contributing to the cultural life of the United States, despite the immense challenges we face. There are so many women to cite working across all art disciplines and media that I hesitate to single anyone out. But look around—we are everywhere.

MARTHA SOUTHGATE '82

INSPIRATION IN BOOKS

Citizen: An American Lyric by poet Claudia Rankine

Books by antiracist educator Robin DiAngelo (*White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism; What Does It Mean to Be White?*)

Becoming by Michelle Obama

Sing, Unburied, Sing: A Novel and other books by Jesmyn Ward

Thick: And Other Essays by sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom

Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower by Brittney Cooper

When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele

JOYCE YOUNG '75



WHAT EXCITES ME is to see black women today running for office at all levels and seeing especially the confidence they are exuding that says “I belong here.”

STEPHANIE MICKLE '94

WHAT EXCITES ME is how united we are. What gives me joy is how determined we are to propel ever forward, in support of each other. And what gives me hope is how resilient we have always been and continue to be. Our history is resplendent with the hardest-won triumphs. Sometimes that meant advancing to places our ancestors would never have deemed possible, from Smith College to the corporate boardroom and the White House. Other times it meant overcoming obstacles designed to break us, from the layered atrocities of slavery to the racist and sexist brutality that still shapes so much of our lives. To be clear, we must still fight for even the most basic equal rights, from our very safety to the sanctity of our vote.

CAROLINE CLARK '85

ABOUT BLACK WOMEN IN THE WORLD RIGHT NOW?



I SEE HOPE EVERYWHERE. We see record participation by black women in the political process, unprecedented electoral success by black women in Congress and legislatures around the country and powerful black women activists pushing our country closer to its stated ideals. At the end of the day, I am hopeful because I know what black women have already overcome and achieved. When I see what is behind us, I can't help but be confident and inspired by what lies ahead of us.

DEBORAH ARCHER '93



I AM VERY EXCITED that black women—as well as folks that are “woman adjacent,” such as black female-bodied but gender-nonconforming and trans folks—are in more leadership positions, creating their own positions and are shifting the perspectives in white-dominant spaces, even if it's one drop at a time. I get a ton of joy from seeing a black woman who supports the upward mobility of black women and queer people of color win a seat in Congress, win an Emmy, a Grammy or be given a platform like HBO to tell the wide range of black narratives and shed light on our brilliance.

BILLY DEAN THOMAS (OLIVIA MCCLENDON '14)

RIGHT NOW, I love the fact that Black Girl Magic is a movement. It excites me to see black women lifting each other up; it's especially motivating when it comes from the younger generations. Also, people of all races and genders are beginning to understand the intersectionality of the black female.

SABINE JEAN '11



DISCRIMINATED AGAINST, ignored, dismissed and ridiculed, still, in every shade of excellence, we rise. Beyond media oversexualization of our image character. We rise. Beyond environments that train us to limit ourselves to motherhood and poverty. We rise. Beyond workplaces that force glass ceilings down on our heads in exchange for privileged white-male mediocrity. We rise.

The evidence cannot be denied, from former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama to the incredible mothers of NBA and NFL athletes to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute President Shirley Ann Jackson to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In every sphere, we rise and will continue to rise. The Oval Office cannot be far away.

CHARLISE LYLES '81

'AM I THE ONLY BLACK PERSON IN HERE?'

When you stand alone, every choice—to speak up, stand back or observe quietly—seems fraught

By Sabine Jean '11
Photograph by Beth Perkins

I grew up in Flatbush, Brooklyn, which is mostly populated by Caribbean immigrants. For most of my childhood, that was all I knew. Whether it was school, church, my community, my neighborhood, everyone I was surrounded by had a similar background to mine. Their parents also spoke with an accent. It was as if everyone had common ground. High school and then Smith exposed me to people of different backgrounds.

I went into UCLA Law on the heels of a campaign where the Black Law Students Association shed light on the fact that “Out of the 1,100 students at UCLA, only 33 are black.” My immediate reaction was, “Oh, this is what I’m getting myself into. Great.” During my first year, when I walked into anything—a classroom, an event, a group interview—I automatically scanned the room and asked myself, “Am I the only black person in here?”

You become hyperaware of when you’re the only one, or if you’re the first one or if you might be the last one for a while. Sometimes you second-guess yourself: “Am I here because I’m a black female, or am I here because I’m good at what I do?”

When I am the only one, sometimes I say nothing. I just observe. I’ve been in situations where I’ve heard uninformed statements and I wonder, “If I wasn’t here, how far would this have gone?” Other times, I make sure my presence is known and I speak up. I might be the solo opinion in the room, or I might have a few allies. I still get nervous. If I speak up, am I going to be speaking up on behalf of every single black female? Or am I just going to leave it as is and not say anything and not let the people in the room see me as representative of a large group of people?

At my firm I help coordinate the pro bono work caseload. Whether you’re a CEO or you’re a low-wage worker just trying to get your paycheck, you are



Sabine Jean '11 practices law in New York City, where she helps coordinate her firm's pro bono work. She likes knowing she can help people who look like her.



treated with equal integrity and respect. I realize, probably more often than other people would, that we wouldn't be able to take on most of these clients if we didn't have this practice.

The firm has done many criminal-background-check cases upholding Ban the Box laws. People of color, more

often than not, are the ones impacted by employers conducting background checks. There are also procedures that employers aren't following. At the end of the day, I really do appreciate knowing that my work impacts people that look like me. I value that the firm has a commitment to doing this work; even

the fact that a position like mine exists demonstrates our willingness to incorporate social justice into our everyday work.—AS TOLD TO APRIL SIMPSON '06

Sabine Jean '11 is a public interest fellow and associate at Outten & Golden LLP in New York City.

'RACISM IS THEIR PROBLEM—NOT YOURS'

A mother's wise words leave a lasting message

By Vickie Shannon '79
Photograph by Charles Ford



As I opened the door to my dorm room, trying to balance the irrepressible excitement of my first day at Smith with the mounting apprehension of being away from home, my eyes met the stares of my new (Caucasian) roommate and her mom, who sat huddled on her bed. I traversed the room with an outstretched hand, saying, "Hi, I'm Vi..." but before I could say "Vickie," the mom stood up with hands on her waist and said, "Don't touch my daughter's things." I graduated more than 30 years ago, but I still remember that excitement-busting, racist-laden introduction verbatim.

At that point in my life, an overarching shyness coupled with imbedded family morals that taught respect, honor and concessions to adults at all times prevented me from responding. Although I wanted to confront the mom and let her know that her racist assumptions of me were not right, I covered and left the room to call my parents. "What makes that woman think I would steal her daughter's things? Maybe I made a mistake coming here," I said, choking on a flood of tears. "Vickie," my mom said, "does this woman know you?" "No," I said. "Then she will learn that you won't steal her daughter's things when they remain where she left them the next day, the next month, the next year," Mother said. "You don't have to prove anything to her. Just be true to who you are and be yourself." "More important," she said, "why would you allow anyone, let alone someone who doesn't know you, to steal your dreams? Why would you give her that kind of power over you?"

My parents' wisdom has underpinned my success in navigating a predominantly white and male-dominated world. Being grounded in who I am and knowing the value I bring to my profession and to larger society helps to insulate me from a lot of the noise of racism. That certainly doesn't mean I am immune to racist encounters and pejoratives. I've had my share, including a patient who once referred to me as the N-word. However, I have learned that what a person calls me is far less important than what I choose to respond to. And how I respond can translate into a "teachable moment" that helps to quell the ugliness and ignorance of racism.—AS TOLD TO APRIL SIMPSON '06

Vickie Shannon '79 is a pulmonary and critical care physician at The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and a Smith College medalist.



'BLACK WOMEN CAN RALLY VOTERS, INFLUENCE ELECTIONS AND WIN'

By Stephanie Mickle '94

In my book, *Follow the Leader*, I make the case for more women getting involved in the political process on some level, whether it's volunteering or running for office. More diversity yields better policy outcomes. So I feel a sense of progress when I see African American women and other women of color from all walks of life becoming politically engaged and running for office in greater numbers and winning. This action, in turn, creates demand for diverse campaign managers, diverse fundraisers, diverse political advisers, diverse professional political staff, diverse communications directors and so on. It forces the major political parties to become more diverse, not because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the pragmatic thing to do.

At the early stages of their campaigns, many black women are considered long-shot candidates because they do not have the role models, the institutional knowledge or the support of their parties and donors. But when they win their primaries (as did Ayanna Pressley in the Massachusetts Seventh Congressional District race) and when their get-out-the-vote efforts are successful (as was the case in the U.S. Senate race between Doug Jones and Roy Moore) they prove that black women can rally voters, influence elections and win.

As we welcome more diverse candidates into the political arena, we need to be careful not to let our own internalized racism detract from our larger goals. Sometimes black women can be overly critical of one another in ways that do not benefit themselves or the greater good. Take the case of Stacey Abrams, the 2018 Democratic gubernatorial candidate in Georgia. By all metrics, Abrams was supremely qualified. Spelman- and Yale-educated, practicing attorney, former minority leader in the Georgia State House, upstanding citizen and overall great human being. Yet, black women—and others—focused on her hairstyle, her weight and her marital status instead of her ability to lead a state.



When black candidates run, diversity multiplies in political staffs and within parties

Sometimes black women can discount themselves before anyone else has the chance to do so. Likewise, sometimes black women can view themselves as having to be overly masculine. The prevalence of single-parent families in our communities has required black women to be both mother and father, female and male, in many households. This is not a comment about gender identity. This is an observation about black women historically not having the freedom—because of systemic oppression—to just be. My greatest hope for the next generation of black women is that we will try to love ourselves and celebrate each other in a greater way.

Stephanie Mickle '94 is the CEO of Mickle Public Affairs Agency, a political consulting firm in Washington, D.C.